

CRAIN'S CLEVELAND BUSINESS

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Northeast Ohio groups pursue millions in Build Back Better funds

KIM PALMER

Contributed photo

MAGNET's plan to strengthen and modernize the region's manufacturing supply chain "is very aligned with where we are heading as a region and with our mission," said Baiju Shah, president and CEO of the Greater Cleveland Partnership.

Business leaders want to use a portion of a pot of \$1 billion in federal funding for post-COVID transformational projects as an accelerant to create a more regional economic identity for Northeast Ohio.

As Ethan Karp, president and CEO of MAGNET, sees things, "It's very hard to tell the story of our region." That's because, as Karp puts it, "When it comes to manufacturing, other regions are known for one thing, but because we are the supply chain of America, we make pieces of things. It is harder for us to tell that story."

The nonprofit manufacturing consulting group and Northeast Ohio's business, educational and civic leaders are trying to sharpen the telling of that story so the region can take advantage of grants potentially as large as \$75 million — part of the U.S. Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration's Build Back Better Regional Challenge.

The BBB program allocates a total of \$1 billion in American Rescue Plan funding "to assist communities nationwide in their efforts to build back better by accelerating the economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic and building local economies that will be resilient to future economic shocks."

At the Oct. 19 deadline, 529 applications were submitted nationwide, including 16 from Ohio, with four of those from this region. One of them is MAGNET's "Northeast Ohio's Advanced Manufacturing Cluster: Smart Manufacturing and Advanced Materials," a plan to strengthen, modernize and grow the region's manufacturing supply chain.

"There is definitely some serendipity that the government is offering this now," Karp said.

Of the 529 applications nationwide, between 50 and 60 of those proposals will be awarded \$500,000 in grants and given about four months to further hone each program for final consideration. Then about 30 of those proposals will be selected to receive \$25 million to \$75 million in BBB funding.

In addition to MAGNET, Northeast Ohio organizations that applied for grants are the Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency (NOACA), the Ohio Aerospace Institute and the Youngstown-area Eastgate Regional Council of Governments.

The BBB challenge initiative announced in mid-July gave MAGNET and its regional partners limited time to put together a plan that would, in the words of the program description, "transform the regional economy and supercharge business through a collection of collaborative, aligned projects designed to grow new industries and scale existing ones."

"We hadn't anticipated (this program), but after the catalytic impact of bringing so many groups together during COVID to create emergency personal protection equipment and then launching a blueprint for our industry strategic vision, we were well positioned to take advantage of this opportunity in a really short time frame," Karp said.

The "we" includes members of the region's chambers of commerce and the Greater Cleveland Partnership; economic development agencies Team NEO and JobsOhio; higher education institutions; and other industry stakeholders.

"Historically, partners come together to sort of say: 'How do we tie (this proposal) together so that we can all take our slices and go home?'" Karp said. "But this was a coordinated strategy with the idea that we're stronger together, and that fundamentally our supply chains and future in manufacturing are truly linked."

The need to react to the disruptions brought on by the pandemic set in motion a new wave of community collaboration and a sense of urgency around technology adoption, Karp said.

The proposal would leverage the federal dollars with a one-to-one matching funds for high-impact projects aimed at strengthening the region's interconnected supply chain by investing in talent development, technology adoption and innovation. Those investments span the region and diverse industries, including polymers and materials, water technologies, batteries and sensors, and the adoption of the Internet of Things, while also addressing issues of equity and sustainability.

"This plan is very aligned with where we are heading as a region and with our mission," said Baiju Shah, president and CEO of the Greater Cleveland Partnership.

As part of the collaborative process, GCP's equity and inclusion staff helped make sure the plan "threaded equity and inclusion throughout" so that things like equitable workforce development and supplier diversity measures are not just an add-on in the proposal, Shah said.

NOACA, which provides transportation and environmental planning for the Cleveland area, submitted its BBB application for a plan called "Greater Cleveland CARES," which stands for Careers, Accessibility for the Realization of Equity and Sustainability. NOACA hopes to strengthen the region's transit connections between schools that train workers for health care careers and the hospitals and facilities that need those employees, said Grace Gallucci, the organization's executive director and CEO.

"There are thousands of jobs that are open because we don't have workers, and colleges need more capacity to train those workers," Gallucci said.

She said the "eds and meds plan" would build a pipeline for those pursuing health care careers to the places where they are needed within NOACA's five-county footprint, removing transportation barriers to create a sustainable and equitable transportation network.

With the BBB dollars, the region would increase the number of health care workers, which helps the region's largest industry while also improving the health outcomes for residents.

"It works together," Gallucci said. "There is economic opportunity to make an investment in public infrastructure, both the physical and educational, that improves access and mobility."

Although the proposals are not public, the Ohio Aerospace Institute plan focuses on financing to support a multistate, advanced mobility hyperloop project. The Youngstown group's recovery plan seeks funding for advanced manufacturing, electric vehicles and battery storage, smart logistics, and information technology, including a national energy storage workforce training and innovation center.

Inline Play

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